

Pope Francis greeted by protests in Ireland, following child sex scandals, abortion rights fight

The pontiff finds an Ireland marked by social change, less deference to Catholic Church

By Casey Quinlan

Think Progress (26.08.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2okkhD0> – Pope Francis is in Ireland this weekend for the first papal visit since Pope John Paul II's in 1979. As the Pontiff might quickly have gleaned from the protests joined by thousands of demonstrators, things have changed since then with Ireland's Catholic faithful.

For one thing, there is less far deference to officials in the Church hierarchy, after a determined fight by women in Ireland for reproductive rights. And the Catholic Church in Ireland and abroad has been rocked by multiple sexual abuse scandals, including a recent report involving over 1,000 victims in Pennsylvania.

According to the Independent, some people have refused to attend events presided over by Pope Francis in silent protest and "disavowal" of the church's "stranglehold" on culture and government in Ireland.

Other protesters gathered at Dublin Castle after Pope Francis' arrival on Saturday to demonstrate against child sex abuse in the Catholic Church. Margaret McGuckin, herself a survivor of sexual violence, said she wanted the church to know survivors were still making their voices heard.

"The Pope now needs to stand up to the plate and do something for the survivors. We need redress, we need the church held to account," McGuckin told the Independent.

The share of young people who identify as Catholics is now much lower than in previous generations. In 2015, Ireland voted to legalize same-sex marriage. Its Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, who is gay, welcomed Pope Francis to the country on Saturday.

Earlier this year, Ireland voted overwhelmingly to repeal its near-total ban on abortion, with two in three Irish voters approving to legalize it. A 1990s case of a girl who had been raped and sought an abortion outside of the country, and who was only allowed access to the procedure after she became suicidal, started a national discussion about abortion. In 2012, a woman died of a cardiac arrest after doctors refused to perform an abortion, even though physicians knew she expected a miscarriage – a horrifying incident which gained national attention.

Meanwhile, just this month, a Pennsylvania grand jury report detailed abuse that spanned several decades and accused more than 300 priests of sexually abusing children across six Roman Catholic dioceses.

There were reportedly more than 1,000 victims, and those are just the victims who were willing to come forward. Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, the head of Pope Francis' Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, canceled his visit to Dublin so that he could look into investigations into alleged sexual misconduct in Boston that were separate from the grand jury report.

Questions swirl around what Pope Francis himself knows about sexual abuse within the church. A letter from Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò alleges that he told Pope Francis about sexual abuse allegations against former D.C. archbishop Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and that the Pope did nothing.

"In this extremely dramatic moment for the universal Church, he must acknowledge his mistakes and, in keeping with the proclaimed principle of zero tolerance, Pope Francis must be the first to set a good example to Cardinals and Bishops who covered up McCarrick's abuses and resign along with all of them," Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò wrote.

In a huge demonstration on Sunday, people protested the Pope's visit at the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin.

Other protests involved people tying baby shoes with black mourning ribbon to the railings of former Magdalene laundries, according to Dublin Live. These church-run institutions were for "fallen women" and they experienced abuse and ill treatment in these laundries. In the 1990s, a mass grave was discovered on the grounds of one of the laundries.

Another group called We Are Church also held a protest on Dublin's Ha'penny Bridge – tying blue ribbons and rainbow flags to the bridge – and said the church must accept female priests, welcome LGBTQ members, and truly confront its sexual abuse problem.

Pope Francis acknowledged abuse allegations and said to lawmakers and diplomats in Dublin on Saturday, “I cannot fail to acknowledge the grave scandal caused in Ireland by the abuse of young people by members of the church charged with responsibility for their protection and education.”

But survivors of sexual abuse and other critics of the church's handling of sexual abuse have said his remarks were not enough and that he didn't provide any indication of what steps the church would take on the issue. According to the Washington Post, Mark Vincent Healy, an Irish victim of church sexual abuse, the pope's speech was “empty.”

“I was with a group of survivors, and they were all upset with the statements as being ineffectual,” Healy told the Post.

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